THE NATURE OF MEANING

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Lecture 1
Where do we find meaning?

- My grandmother was a great one for mixing historical lessons in with child rearing. A favorite, regularly used when one of the grandchildren was being rebuked for failing to satisfactorily complete some minor task and was, consequently, being required to do it over, involved pointing to the needle-point text hanging over the sofa which read, 'We won't come back 'til it's over, over there.' This was inevitably followed by the question, 'Where would the world be if they hadn't done their jobs properly?'

  (Tyler & Evans 2003: 1)
over has four distinct interpretations

- $over^a$ can be paraphrased by 'again'
- $over^b$ by 'above'
- $over^c$ by 'finished'
- $over^n$ by 'in some other place'

Are the various meanings of a single word simply accidental or systematically related?
English spatial particles - *over, up, down, in* and *out*, etc.

- highly polysemous
- experientially based
the various meanings of spatial particles are systematically related

the distinct but related senses of a single spatial particle constitute a semantic network

the other senses might be diachronically or perhaps developmentally related to this sense

each distinct sense is potentially subject to a number of additional or on-line interpretations
A 'simple' example: **the cat jumped over the wall** - a situated on-line interpretation

Possible trajectories for:

(1.1) *The cat jumped over the wall*

Which diagram best represents the event described by the sentence?
Figure 1.2 Trajectory paths potentially coded by jump

(a) From the ground to the table  (b) On a trampoline  (c) Across a puddle
Figure 1.3 Trajectory paths potentially coded by 
over

(a) The picture is over (b) The bird hovered over the flower (c) The cloud passed over the city
CONTRADICTION

• The sentence in (1.1) which contains apparently ambiguous lexical items is consistently interpreted as unambiguous.

• Speakers of English consistently pick out just the right ones to assign interpretation (d) in figure 1.1.

• Diagram (d) in figure 1.1 crucially represents the cat's motion ending at a point on the opposite side of the wall relative to the starting position of the jump.
Let us consider just what kind of information it would be necessary to include in the lexical entries for over, jump, cat in order to obtain the interpretation diagrammed in (d) of figure 1.1.
• it codes the trajectory followed, as represented in a sentence like (1.1) (e.g. Brugman and Lakoff, 1988; Dewell, 1994; Kreitzer, 1997; Lakoff. 1987)

- a change of the spatial particle involved often results in a change in the interpretation of the trajectory

(1.2) a. Jane marched up the stairs.
    b. Jane marched down the stairs.
Following Langacker (1987)

• the focal element which follows the trajectory (e.g. the cat) as the trajector or TR

• the backgrounded element as the landmark or LM

• over can code a spatial relation in which the TR is located statically higher than the LM (as in The picture is over the mantel)
• The bird hovered over the flower
  \((TR? \ LM? \ Motion?)\)

• The plane flew over the city
  \((TR? \ Trajectory? \ LM?)\)

• Sam crawled over the wall
  \(TR? \ LM? \ Shape \ of \ trajectory? \ Contact?\)
• the verb also carries info about the trajectory shape
• the agent's goals - lexical entries for nouns
• possible kinds of motion TR could engage in

CONCLUSION - the information supplied by the syntactic configuration and individual lexical items cannot account for the interpretation normally assigned to this seemingly most straightforward of sentences
The role of background knowledge - Grice (1975, 1978), Reddy (1979) and others

• not only what is uttered (the linguistic production)
• but additionally the surrounding context
• knowledge of speakers' intentions
• knowledge of speakers' beliefs, including beliefs about how the world works
The cat jumped over the wall
- recurring experiences with the world

- understanding force dynamics (gravity)
- how these dynamics affect physical objects (cats) (Talmy, 1988, 2000)
- **jump** - the TR is physically displaced, that is, motion is involved, and hence a trajectory is projected
- **over** - at some point in the trajectory, the cat is higher than the wall
None of the individual lexical items explicitly provides information concerning the shape of the trajectory.

This information comes from:

- cognitive processes,
- conceptual structure and
- background knowledge rather than the individual lexical items.
Langacker: 'linguistic expressions are not meaningful in and of themselves, but only through the access they afford to different stores of knowledge that allow us to make sense of them' (1987: 155)

lexical items are points of access (in Langacker's terms) to the totality of our knowledge regarding a particular conceptual entity
In normal communication lexical items do not occur in isolation

• the lexical items always occur in context
• their precise interpretation changes with each use
• a typical dictionary definition inevitably fails to provide for the infinite amount of variation and detail that arises when a lexical item is interpreted in context
The patterns and organization we perceive as reality do not in fact exist independently in the world itself, but are largely the result of our cognitive processing.

Our perceptions of the world are determined largely by conceptual organization being imposed on sense-perceptory input (Jackendoff 1983, 1990, 1992)
Jane stood in the flower-bed.
Jane stood on the flower-bed.

- conceptualized space 'involves relativistic relationships rather than absolutely fixed quantities' (Talmy 1988: 170)
- the relationships between objects are subjective and largely influenced by the interpretation imposed by the conceptual system
To sum up

• spatial particles are polysemous
• some meanings are constructed on-line in the moment of speaking and listening
• many previous accounts have vastly underestimated the amount of information outside the meaning of lexical items and the grammatical construction

• => meaning construction must be inherently conceptual in nature
• understanding the relationship between language, thought and the nature of reality